

Text: Prov 17.17

For this message I am heavily indebted to Derek Kidner, whose article “The friend”¹ provides the basic outline and a good deal of the background data.

Pr 17.17 A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity.

This is perhaps the classic text on friendship in the book of Proverbs, perhaps in the whole Bible.

However, the word translated ‘friend’ here is a very broad word. It is translated correctly in 17.17, but in different contexts, it can have quite a different meaning. Consider Prov 18.17: here one’s ‘friend’ is the fellow taking him to court.

[Perhaps this is behind the ‘lawyer-talk’ you hear in the courtroom: ‘my learned friend’ – the lawyer on the other side.]

The Hebrew word “is used for **friend, neighbor, associate** — close or occasional.”² Kidner says, “At the far extreme, it signifies merely ‘the **other fellow**’; at its nearest it stands for a person with whom one has close fellowship.”³

While the word is used that way, God clearly wants us to look at other people differently: Lev 19.18 ‘thou shalt love [the other fellow] as thyself’ – that’s our word there... ‘neighbour, friend, associate, acquaintance, stranger’. When we add in our Lord’s teaching about the neighbour in the New Testament, we see that the biblical expectation is for us to have a high regard for the other fellow, whether he be a close associate or not.

But there is such a thing as a close ‘other fellow’ – a close friend. Recently, we talked about influence and associations. One of the things I said was that you should cultivate good influences. The way you do that is by finding good friends — and by being a good friend.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 17 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964), 41–42.

² R. Laird Harris, “2186 רֵעַ,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 853, BibleWorks, v.8.

³ Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, 41.

Proposition: Friendship is not passive enjoyment of another fellow's favor; it is active promotion of the other fellow's good.

I. The good neighbour

A. Social expectations

1. Neighbourliness (3.29)
2. Slow to strife with the 'other fellow' (25.8-9)
3. Cultivate kindness
 - a. Don't rejoice when your enemy stumbles (24.17-19)
 - b. Do good to your enemy (25.21-22)

Kidner: be "disarmingly kind"⁴

4. Generous silence (11.12 – 'lacks sense' NAU, 'void of wisdom' KJV; Heb., 'heart', *leb*)
5. Grace rather than contempt (14.21)

B. Tempered by discerning constraints

1. Admonished about getting too close to the angry man (22.24-25)
2. Warned about entrapment of surety (6.1-5)
3. Led by prudent examination (12.26)
 - a. Debate among the translators

- 1) The righteous *is* more excellent than his neighbour (KJV)
- 2) The righteous *is* more excellent than his neighbour (ESV)
- 3) The righteous is a guide to his neighbor (NAU)
- 4) The righteous person is cautious in his friendship (NET) – Kidner calls this 'the literal translation'⁵

- b. The idea is that the wise man evaluates relationships – because of the second truth in the verse, relationships can be dangerous

⁴ Kidner, 41.

⁵ Kidner, 94.

The disposition of a Good Neighbour: **friendly** but **cautious**

C. The opposite spirit shows the state of the heart – it is wicked (21.10)

II. The good friend

A. Constancy

1. Many fair-weather friends in Pr (14.20, 19.4, 6, 7)
2. But there are constant friends (18.24b, 17.17)
3. Exhorted to be a constant friend (27.10a)

B. Candor

1. The ‘faithful wounds’ (27.6)
2. Opposite of the flatterer who spreads a net for the feet (29.5)

David failed to befriend his son Absalom: never rebuked him, cost him his life (1 Ki 1.6)

3. The thanks for candor may be delayed (28.23)

C. Counsel

1. The cheering effect of fellowship (27.9)
2. The healthy clash of differing views (27.17)

“A true friendship should have both elements, the reassuring and the bracing.”⁶

Are you a friend who can take correction or disagreement and maintain the friendship?

D. Tact

1. A true friend doesn’t take advantage of the friendship – he respect’s the feelings of his friend
2. Proverbs is full of negative examples
 - a. Outstaying a welcome (25.17)
 - b. Heartiness at the wrong time (27.14)

⁶ Kidner, 42.

- c. Insensitivity (25.20)
- d. Not knowing when to give up a joke (26.18-19)

III. The element of risk

- A. The strongest word for friend in Hebrew is one that speaks of close intimacy, a bosom companion
- B. Ironically, it is often used in the context of betrayal
 - 1. Wife abandoning her husband (2.17)
 - 2. Friends separated by slander (16.28)
 - 3. A repeater of secrets (17.9)
- C. We need to **guard** close friendships.

Conclusion:

When we consider this insight into friendship, we often think in terms of how our friends treat us. But remember the proposition:

Proposition: Friendship is not passive enjoyment of another fellow's favor; it is active promotion of the other fellow's good.

The wisdom of Proverbs guides us in our activity – are you a friend who is constant, candid, open with counsel, full of care for your friend's well-being?

If you cultivate these qualities, you will also cultivate good friendships.

Last, these qualities have spiritual depth and insight to them – friendships that glorify God are friendships that are developed at a spiritual level in concert with the active Holy Spirit in one's life.